

CONSERVATION FARMING AND THE FOOD SECURITY-INSECURITY MATRIX IN ZIMBABWE: A CASE OF WARD 21 CHIVI RURAL

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ABSTRACT

This study is based on fieldwork conducted in ward 21 Chivi south district of Masvingo, Zimbabwe. Conservation farming has been widely embraced as an antidote to the perennial food insecurity situation, bedeviling drought prone regions in Zimbabwe, such as Chivi south district. This study evaluates the villagers' perceptions on conservation farming as a sine qua non to their threatened food security in the era of climatic change. This study also examines the relationships between all the participating stakeholders in this conservation project. The study also investigates the implications of such relations on agricultural productivity, sustainable development and rural livelihoods. In view of the much heralded advantages of Conservation farming, it is polemical whether the program will be the remedy to food problems, haunting the said part of Zimbabwe. From the fieldwork conducted, it emerged that the program is a conundrum because it is riddled with conflict, contradictions, and power struggles between participants involved in the development process and implementation of this initiative. This brings into question the desirability of such development interventions. Results from the study were useful in determining whether or not to jettison unilateral models of rural development in support of people centered approaches, which embraces local needs and priorities thereby leading to sustainable development. This study is largely grounded in qualitative methodology, with unstructured interviews and focus group discussions being the main data collection techniques. Secondary sources of data, such as local government agricultural gazettes, Zimbabwean farmer magazines, and Non-Governmental Organization reports, were also employed to corroborate data from primary sources of data collection. Norman Long's actor-oriented approach was used as the fundamental theoretical perspective in this research. This perspective is important in the quest for reconciling the conflicting perceptions of the local communities and the Non-Governmental organizations that are prescribing Conservation farming as the panacea to the plight of drought-prone communities.

Keywords: Conservation farming, food security, sustainable development, Interface analysis

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The problem of food insecurity has become more intensely pronounced in recent years with the threat posed by recent trends, such as climate change, water, and rainfall scarcity, as well as ecosystems and biodiversity degradation exacerbating these problems. Additional pressure has also emanated from the skyrocketing population growth and its simultaneous demand for food. In Sub-Saharan Africa, most rural communities are languishing in abject poverty, yet the agricultural systems being promoted there have unacceptably high environmental, economic, and social costs (Bolwig & Gibbon, 2007). To note is the

fact that nearly 80% of the population in Sub-Saharan countries lives in rural areas with 70% of this rural population being directly dependent on agriculture for their livelihood (Carney, 1998). It is thus against this scenario and statistics that, to improve crop production in marginal rainfall regions, such as Chivi, rural farmers have to consequently adopt farming practices that conserve fragile soils and improve its fertility. Conservation farming is being promoted as a panacea to the production challenges, confronting rural smallholder families in Chivi, in particular, and Sub-Saharan Africa, at large. Conservation farming, in its current manifestation, was introduced three decades ago and is currently being practiced on more than a hundred million hectares of land worldwide in more than fifty countries (Ellis, 2000). This type of farming has been viewed as suitable for land and ideal for promoting productivity and sustainability. Kassam (2010) argued that not only does this type of farming benefit the farmers concerned, but also the environment and the larger population. Ellis (2000) noted that tillage has long been used by farmers to loosen the soil, make a seedbed, and control weeds. However, not all outcomes of this practice are positive, especially when considered over long time scales. It should be noted that climate change is a reality and agriculture, in this case, is both a sufferer and contributor, and hence it cannot ignore this reality. Conservation farming practices hold the promise of providing both a strategy for mitigating climate change and also working as an adaptive mechanism to cope with climate change. The practice of ploughing the field or tillage to prepare for sowing or seedbed preparation has been vogue since times immemorial. Most farmers have perceived that tillage or soil loosening would improve soil fertility, increase its ability to absorb rainwater, and help in controlling unwanted weed flora. The rationale was that organic matter is critical to having a good and stable soil structure and repeated tillage operations can cause deterioration of the soil's physical properties, hence making it vulnerable to rainwater runoff and erosion. It has been discovered that tillage operations, over time, cause a decline in soil fertility and overall productivity resulting from deterioration of soils' physical, chemical, and biological properties (Scott, 1985). Thus, the practice of conservation farming advocates minimal soil disturbance and hence ideally no tillage at all is undertaken. Further, Hobbs (2007) noted that conservation farming advocates that the combined social and economic benefits gained from combining production and protecting the environment, hence it becomes an integration of ecological management with modern scientific agricultural production.

Despite its much heralded benefits, conservation farming has, however, been accepted with mixed feelings. Kassam (2010) notes that conservation farming has been difficult for many people to accept because it goes against many of the people's traditionally cherished beliefs. He argues that many people have questioned the feasibility of merely growing without ploughing the land first, which is the traditional blueprint. Even where appropriate land and management interventions have been fused into the traditional farming practices, conflicts, contradictions, and power struggles between 'experts' (that is, agriculture extension workers, relief workers, and other government officials spearheading the implementation of the project) have often militated against the achievement of the much heralded food security in these drought-prone areas. Fowler & Rockstrom (2001) noted that conservation farming is based on the fundamental principles of rebuilding the soil, optimizing crop production inputs and henceforth improved output.

To buttress the above analysis, Fanelli & Dumba (2006) noted that introducing conservation farming to community members requires patience, understanding, and careful explanation to convince them to adopt an alien farming practice. They further note that aspects of conservation farming may initially seem unusual to community members, and it may take time for them

to overcome their skepticism and understand the new approach as well as its advantages over the traditional conventional farming methods. This is compounded by the fact that yield improvement, under conservation farming, takes a few years to manifest (Simuyemba, 1998; Bwalya, cited in Kaumbutho & Simalenga, 1999). Also, although conservation farming is considered a 'low-labor' input agriculture, there are still some HIV and AIDS-affected households that do not have sufficient labor resources to succeed on their own, especially during peak labor periods, such as basin making and harvesting. These households are likely to include those headed by elderly people, those with few members, and those with chronically ill members who require constant care.

In view of the above, this study evaluates the life worlds or lived experiences of farmers and juxtaposes them against the perceived advantages that conservation farming brings to them. From an interventionist view, conservation farming takes advantage of the natural ecological processes to conserve moisture, enhance soil fertility, and improve soil structure, and to reduce soil erosion and the presence of diseases and pests, with attendant increases in yields. From a communal farmer perspective, it remains polemical whether conservation farming will harmonize the interests of 'experts' and that of the intended beneficiaries, that is, community households in the Chivi District. Following Norman Long's interface analysis, it can be noted that development interventions are shrouded in power contestations on the part of participants. Long's analysis demonstrates the advantages of adopting an ethnographic actor interface approach to understanding the on-going dynamics of rural development and policy intervention processes. In this vein, conservation farming in Zimbabwe has not proven to be an exception. This is so, in view of conflicts, both latent and manifest, that pervades the conservation farming process. Petty (2008) argued that conservation farming is being increasingly promoted as constituting a set of principles and practices that can make a contribution to sustainable production intensification. This is so because conservation farming systems have been said to have a higher adaptability to climatic changes because of the higher affective rainfall due to higher infiltration as well as greater soil moisture – holding capacity. To this end Derpsch (2005) argued that wherever conservation farming has been adopted it appears to have had both agricultural and environmental benefits since it tends to promote soil health and productivity capacity. In compliment to the above arguments Shaxson (2006) further argued that conservation farming is an application of modern agricultural technologies to improve production while concurrently protecting and enhancing the land resources on which production depends.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Despite the conservation farming hype, there has been an ambivalent reception of this farming practice by communal farmers in the Chivi District of Zimbabwe. This lukewarm reception has created challenges to government and relief officials working for Non-Governmental Organizations in successfully implementing the said farming practice. While relief and government officials have responded to low productivity by providing alien expertise, inorganic fertilizers, hybrid seeds, and other exotic technologies, they have done very little to address the interface between communal farmers and experts. Consequently, a divergence of interests has pervaded conservation farming process. This incongruence of interests between the former and the latter has hindered a speedy realization of high productivity forecasted under conservation farming. It is because of this that this research focuses on how conflicts of priorities, tradition, and expertise between communal farmers and interventionists can retard the much heralded food security projections that come with the implementation of

conservation farming. The anticipation is that policies will also be devised to address these ideological disparities between the major stakeholders in conservation farming.

STUDY OBJECTIVES

The study seeks to address the following objectives:

- 1) To evaluate the farmers' perceptions of conservation farming as a solution to food insecurity;
- 2) To examine relations between all stakeholders involved in conservation farming in ward 21, the Chivi District; and,
- 3) To assess the implications of the above relations on productivity.

METHODOLOGY

This research falls within the qualitative paradigm and draws insights from Bourdieu's project of undermining the illusion of the binary opposition between objectivity and subjectivity, which is a characteristic of traditional structuralist and phenomenological theories, respectively (Jenkins, 1992). To deal with the antimony between objectivity and subjectivity, researchers should engage in reflexive sociology. Bourdieu insists that researchers must, at all times, conduct their research with conscious attention to the effects of their own position, their own set of internalized structures, and how these are likely to distort or prejudice their objectivity (Bourdieu, 1991). This research, therefore, embarks on acknowledged subjectivism, which is essential in avoiding the passing of judgments and analyses, which are informed by the researcher's cultural and social position under the banner of science. In the first place, the choice of researching on conservation farming is a product of vested interests in proving that a myriad of divergences pervade the relations between farmers and government and relief officials.

SAMPLING TECHNIQUES AND PROCEDURE

The study made use of purposive and availability samplings, which are non-probability sampling techniques, in which subjective judgment was used to select respondents based on their relevance to the issue under investigation. Following Flyvberg's (2006) recommendation, the selection of the Chivi District as the research area is based on information-oriented sampling, as aided by the fact that Chivi is a familiar location and is one of the most perennially, drought-prone areas of Zimbabwe, thus enabling the accessing of rich information on the subject matter under study. Being a conservation farmer will be a pre-condition for participation in the research, even though it is the farmer's discretion to opt in or out of the research. Although sex was not a major variable in the selection of respondents, attempts were made to include equal numbers of male and female farmers, depending on the availability of cases. This was done because farmers are not a monolithic group. Their perceptions towards farming interventions may vary on the basis of gender, age, race, sex, and ethnicity. For instance, while most women have welcomed 'feminine' seeds, such as small grains (sorghum and millet), provided by NGOs, men, in general, have preferred large grains, such as maize. Consequently, attempts were made to incorporate voices of both male and female conservation farmers in order to generate a rich diversity of data.

DATA COLLECTION TECHNIQUES

Unstructured Interviews

Informal or unstructured interviews were used as the main data gathering technique, with thirty farmers being selected for interviewing. From these respondents, five were lead farmers. These are farmers selected on the basis of their proven excellence in conservation farming practices. The justification for selecting the above number of respondents is that it is estimated that plus or minus thirty households are practicing in conservation farming in Chivi (Murwira, 2000). On account of this population, the selected sample was used for generalizing research results with limited degrees of error. This is so because, following Burgess' (1982) suggestion, for research findings to be generalized to the population with limited degrees of error, a sample should comprise of ten percent of the population under study. Following the same principle, the researcher also employed unstructured interviews to interview chiefs, village heads, and ward chairpersons. These are information-rich respondents who are in an informed position in relation to conservation farming.

Unstructured interviews were also employed because of their appropriateness in the case study method adopted in this research. They provided room for the researcher to probe deeply into the issue of conservation farming, to uncover new clues, to open up new dimensions to the phenomenon, and to secure vivid, accurate, and inclusive accounts of respondents that are based on personal experience (Burgess, 1982). Unstructured interviews, therefore, helped in gaining a detailed picture of participants' beliefs and perceptions towards conservation farming.

Focus Group Discussions (FDGs)

Focus group discussions (FGDs) were used to complement unstructured interviews. FGDs were important in bringing the element of multi-voicing as respondents work to corroborate each other's information regarding relations between communal farmers and interventionists. They became useful in eliciting participant's attitudes towards the on-going force for change from their traditional farming practices to conservation farming, their experiences of working with relief officials and government officials, and their beliefs as they get juxtaposed with those of external interventionists. Probing was done to elicit information from respondents whose voices may be muted by some members who will try to dominate the discussion.

Use of Secondary Sources of Data

The researchers also used official documents, such as flyers, pamphlets, government gazettes, and farmer magazines published by NGOs, spearheading conservation farming in the Chivi District. Some of these NGOs are Action fam and CARE International. This helped to augment data gathered through other methods. It also assisted in determining the perceptions of NGOs vis-a-vis the local people's perceptions towards conservation farming.

Data analysis

In this research, data gathering and analysis was undertaken simultaneously as per the recommendations of Becker (1961) (cited in Burgess, 1982). The recording of data during FGDs and unstructured interviews was done thematically in tandem with research objectives, asked questions, answers given, and issues that arose during fieldwork, and this constituted 'in-field' data analysis. 'Post-field' work data analysis involved the reading and re-reading of the fieldwork data transcripts and

relating them to reviewed literature and the theoretical framework. By bringing together field-notes and various written sources, this research product is postmodernist in being 'intersexual', and this acknowledgement is part of the quest for reflexivity.

Ethical considerations

The researcher sought clearance from the Ministry of Local Government to conduct research. Since the year 2000, when Zimbabwe started the fast-track land redistribution program, there has developed a thinly dividing line between agriculture and national politics. Consequently, a researcher whose focus was on land had to declare their research agenda, especially with the alignment towards highlighting that it was not politically motivated. In view of this, clearance became very important as it enabled the research to be conducted with limited political surveillance.

The researcher sought permission from community leaders to collect data. These leaders are chiefs, village heads, lead farmers, and ward chairpersons. This helped in conducting focus group discussions, which, by virtue of gathering people, invited unwarranted attention on the part of community leaders. This meant that the aims of research were made known to these community leaders, who, in their own right, were very valuable in mobilizing people to cooperate with outsiders and providing relevant information. Informed consent was sought from other rank-and-file farmers of the community, who constituted a greater part of the respondents. The purpose of the study was explained to them.

Also, participants were assured that the findings of the research will be used for academic purposes only. This is because secret research can unwarrantedly impinge on human freedom and privacy and can be equated to a situation where a doctor carries out medical experiments on human subjects without their agreement (Bulmer, 1982). This was done in an attempt to foster the participants' confidence in the researcher and to create an environment where the sensitive issues of conflicting interests among social actors in conservation farming were discussed without fear of personal recrimination.

PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

In the final analysis, conservation farming is failing dismally to ameliorate rural poverty and improve food security in the Chivi south district. The main reason is that the NGOs in question are failing to consider the various life-worlds and lived realities of the beneficiaries of development. This study revealed that there is an enigma associated with conservation farming between the NGOs working in cahoots with the government, local leaders, and extension workers, as well as the local farmers in the aforementioned district. The conundrum in this case is that, for the NGOs in question, conservation farming is the most efficient farming technique which suits small holder farmers in drought prone regions who also do not have drought power. Contrary to this, villagers in ward 21 have a negative perception towards conservation farming and the majority of them conceive it as a backbreaking program, which does not warrant the effort given to it. In their view, this program requires a lot of human capital, a luxury which they cannot afford in these trying times. This practice requires the villagers to invest a lot of labor in digging basins, searching for organic fertilizers, mulching, weeding, and other related tasks. One respondent noted that considering the cost and benefit of this conservation farming practice, one is forced to resort to the conventional methods of farming, which, to them, is tried and tested. It should be noted that for this practice to succeed in

ward 21, there is need for rigorous education and availing of herbicides and other related equipment to reduce the need for intensive labor. Thus, without these, conservation farming will remain unpopular with the villagers and consequently its cherished goals will not be realized. In the same vein, sustainable development will; likewise remain a mere rhetoric for as long as the critical priorities of the local villagers are not considered important.

From the fieldwork conducted, conflicting perceptions can be seen in that conservation farming has been aptly called “Diga udye” (euphemism for dig and survive) by its exponents, while for the majority of local farmers in ward 21, labeled it is “Diga ufe” (euphemistically meaning dig and die). They were saying this in light of the incongruence of the investment put in this conservation farming vis a’ vis the benefits and outcomes of this practice. To the villagers, the costs of engaging in conservation farming far outways the perceived benefits of this aforesaid farming technique. Such conflicting perceptions are having negative repercussions on the success of the program and the situation has been exacerbated by the fact that Chivi south district is one of the districts that have been severely affected by labor migration because of its proximity to South Africa. Most, if not all, of the able bodied men and women have joined the bandwagon to South Africa in search of greener pastures, leaving the elderly and children behind who cannot bear the labor demands of this program. To this end, this farming technique thus becomes less appropriate to this area in question. The ravaging HIV and AIDS pandemic is further compounding on the already precarious situation, as far as the labor crisis is concerned. It is disturbing to note that the elderly, especially the women, are expected to spearhead the implementation of the program, in terms of labor, and, at the same time, take care of not only the sick, but also minor children who have been orphaned by the deadly HIV and AIDS pandemic. Thus, for such women, conservation farming, in spite of its much heralded merits, is an unnecessary burden. It is thus against this scenario that conservation farming has been viewed by many women in this ward as overburdening them, despite being overburdened by already existing list of chores. This is in tandem with the views of the Women in Development critics, who noted that most development projects, instead of ameliorating poverty, have increased women’s workloads. Thus, such development projects are inherently self-contradictory and, hence, lead to their eventual failure, as was the case with conservation farming project in the said area.

Although people in ward 21 shun conservation farming because of the aforementioned reasons, their dislike of the project is enhanced by traditional perceptions of the zero tillage system. Traditionally, this farming method was preserved for those in the impecunious category who neither had draught power nor the money to hire people to till the land on their behalf. The issue at stake is that owing to low rainfall totals, emphasis in this district is on animal husbandry rather than crop production to the extent that the majority of these small holder farmers have large herds of cattle, goats, and donkeys. Hence, conservation farming, despite its attractiveness, was not going to make sense to such farmers. They see no value in digging basins, while they have more than enough cattle and donkeys for draught power. One respondent said “what will be the use of donkeys, then, if I dig basins myself instead of using these donkeys for draught power”. Of note, however, is the fact that these farmers are rational and calculative. Thus, they do not opt out of the program, but instead they simply pretend to fully embrace this conservation farming because they’ve seen certain benefits attached to participation in this program. The majority of these farmers said they thrive on misleading the NGOs into believing that they are full members of the project in order to get the much needed seed and fertilizers. Once they get such inputs from these “missionaries” they revert to the

conventional farming methods. Fear for the future is another factor that is compelling these farmers to join conservation farming although their level of commitment is questionable. They have been working with the abovementioned NGOs in various programs for close to a decade. The fear therefore is that if they opt out of the program, they might be left out of future programs by these NGOs. Thus, their participation in this program is merely more cosmetic than genuine, since they participate out of fear of disappointing the NGOs that have been aiding them for a long time during times of need. The advantage that these farmers have is that the NGOs marshaling conservation farming do not have proper monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, which relates to what Chambers (1983) termed as “Rural Development Tourism”. It can thus be noted that at the end of the day, conservation farming is doing very little to improve food security in ward 21, of Chivi south district. While this farming practice has successfully worked in some areas, in this said area it has been a flaw.

The above mentioned challenges associated with conservation farming calls for context specific approaches to rural development if there is a genuine need to enhance food security and achieve the goal of sustainable development. The supporters of this project assumed that since conservation farming worked successfully in Zambia and parts of Bindura, in Zimbabwe, it should produce the same results in Chivi south district. Thus, they blatantly glossed over, or overlooked, the said particularities and complexities of Chivi south district. Proponents of Indigenous Knowledge Systems in development, such as Mararike (1999) and Crush (1995), opine that adopting universally applicable programs, such as conservation farming to rural development, is neither feasible nor desirable. For these scholars, it is imperative for rural development practitioners to move away from the orthodox position where rural farmers are perceived as pathetic, unknowledgeable, and conforming individuals to the realization that they are not ahistorical and homogenous, but instead they are heterogenous and are characterized by multiple realities. Given such a scenario development interventions are therefore not transferable, each condition requires its own solutions and such solutions must be embedded in society’s make up. This highlights the significance of Norman Long’s (1999) Interface Analysis, which emphasize the reconciling of such conflicting worldviews, such as the indigenous peoples’ knowledge and NGOs’ perceptions on conservation farming. It is paramount, therefore, that when designing programs, the NGOs need to consider geographical peculiarities and particularities, culture, history, and other important characteristics if such development interventions are to have meaning in such communities and achieve the intended objectives. It should, thus, be argued that meaningful development projects can only be realized through embracing the local villagers’ culture and knowledge systems.

Following the average and sometimes below average annual rainfall totals, Care International and Action Faim have rationally advocated the production of small grains, such as sorghum, millet, and rapoko, under the banner of conservation farming. Paradoxically, local villagers disparage these crops and, by extension, conservation farming because such crops were traditionally grown to feed livestock and for beer brewing. Thus, for the local farmers, these crops are of less significance in terms of food security. These farmers denigrate the project because, in their view, a real farmer should invest in maize production and should produce maize even in a bad year. This was captured by the statement made by one of the respondents in this study who said, *diga udye kutungana kwembudzi nekuti mapfunde haana dura* (conservation farming is a waste of time and resources because we cannot store sorghum in a granary). These conflicting interests were, however, concealed since farmers feared that disclosing them would jeopardize them with regards to the perceived benefits accrued

owing to participation in the program. The majority of the farmers realized that failure to participate would deprive them of the much needed seed and fertilizer, as well as benefits from future NGO programs. Given such a scenario, the best that these farmers could do was to adopt a public front (where they pretended to fully embrace conservation farming) and the private front (where they showed displeasure and disdain of the program). This position is in tandem with Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach, which explains the villager's aforementioned front stage and back stage dichotomy to conservation farming.

The problem, however, is that the NGOs in question patently treat local farmers as objects rather than subjects of development. Such an approach is having negative ramifications on the project's sustainability. It emerged in this study that farmers in ward 21 of Chivi south district are not passive recipients of development interventions, rather they should be perceived as knowledgeable actors who have the capacity to define and improve their position, even under extreme conditions. Thus such actors have the capacity to influence the outcomes of development interventions. By taking inputs, such as fertilizers and seed, under the semblance of membership to conservation farming and reverting to orthodox farming methods, they are clearly exercising their agency. Hence, they should be treated accordingly. In line with Scott (1985), people in ward 21 are endowed with the capacity to act and react; hence, they embark on daily forms of resistance. This concurs with Scott's (1985) conceptualization of everyday forms of peasant resistance, where the poor peasants portray their displeasure and dislike of certain development projects through rampant sabotaging of strategies. These village farmers do not overtly show the development practitioners that they are not interested in the project, but act in ways that would eventually make their position clear. Such an ambivalent stance is counterproductive and inimical to the success of conservation farming in its endeavor to enhance food security in Chivi south district and, in particular, ward 21. The problem is that conservation farming, ironically, was aimed to be an errand of mercy geared towards catapulting the rural poor out of the vicious circle of poverty and perennial food insecurity.

The above mentioned challenges bedeviling farmers in question, with regards to conservation farming, call into play Long's (1999) actor oriented approach, which seeks to discard blueprint approaches to development, such as conservation farming, in favor of people centered approaches, if meaningful development and food security is to be achieved. It is imperative; therefore, for the aforesaid NGOs to bear in mind that due to various life-worlds, people are social actors, thus, every development intervention is replete with conflict which, if not carefully managed, can render any development intervention obsolete. Taking an interface analysis in this case helps to understand the cultural diversity, social differentiation, and conflict inherent in conservation farming. With regards to conservation farming in ward 21 of Chivi south district, various actors can be identified. These actors include the government, the NGOs, extension workers, traditional authorities, and the local farmers, themselves. These actors have diverging and often conflicting interests towards the conservation farming program. The NGOs want their project to be successful so that they can continue to receive funding from the donors. The government and extension workers, as well as the local authorities, are more inclined towards the project because a number of benefits also accrue to them for taking such a stance towards conservation farming. It was deduced that they do so primarily because they receive more benefits than the local farmers and, in most cases; they receive allowances from NGOs, since these NGOs are desperate to see the program to fruition.

Contrary to the stance of the government, extension workers, and the NGOs, local farmers had sundry interests towards the project because of the reasons mentioned before in this paper. Before implementing the project, it was crucial for the aforementioned NGOs to carry out an interface analysis that could have helped to reconcile these diverging and conflicting interests in the program. The interface analysis occurs at points where different, conflicting life-worlds or social fields occur or are more concrete in social situations or arenas in which interventions become oriented around problems of bridging, accommodating, segregating, or contesting social evaluative and cognitive standpoints towards conservation farming (Long, 1999).

Lack of active participation is also pushing conservation farming into extinction in spite of the vaunted vices to rural development. We argue that to be successful any developmental intervention ought to be designed and executed with significant participation from the grassroots. The lethargic participation by local farmers in Chivi south district is derived from the conviction that conservation farming is an alien project that does not have a place in the development of the district. Beneficiaries in development, in most cases, participate when they appreciate and understand how the project may help them (Salmen, 1987).

Rural farmers in ward 21 of Chivi South district, however, did not have an understanding of how conservation farming can be an engine for moving them out of the food insecurity quagmire confronting them. On the contrary, the program is perceived as a mechanism meant to reverse the gains they have made in ensuring food security in their households. The NGOs argued that the digging of basins helps to keep the soil intact, keeps the soil away from soil erosion, and conserves the much needed soil moisture to the extent that even with minimum rainfall productivity is enhanced. These local farmers, however, hold contradicting and conflicting perceptions on conservation farming. The majority of them strongly believe that basins do not conserve moisture, but expose their crops to the scorching sun. To cement their position, they argue that in previous years, when they used the conventional method, their yields were much better compared to those under conservation farming.

In their flyers and pamphlets, Care International and Action Faim claimed to follow a participatory approach to rural development. This claim, however, is a smoke screen meant to misrepresent reality obtaining, especially in ward 21 of Chivi district. Participation tended to be passive participation rather than active participation. This form of participation was limited in input into decision making and control of the program. The said NGOs simply brought their projects and these local farmers were tasked to rubberstamp the program. This, however, is proving to be a recipe for disaster. There is a need for active participation, as opposed to passive participation, in order to take into account people's right to make decisions and control of the program pertaining to their own development. This helps to instill a sense of ownership of the program and commitment on the part of local farmers. There is that feeling that these local farmers will do everything possible to make sure that this project becomes a success, since they will be identified with the project as theirs. In light of this, Oakley & Marsden (1984) and Bamaberger (1988) opine that active participation empowers local farmers to mobilize their own capacities, be social actors rather than objects of development, manage the resources, make decisions, and control the activities that affect their lives. Active participation, therefore, helps to ensure the likelihood of conservation farming's sustainability in as much as it ensures acceptability of the program by the local farmers.

Power and the ensuing power struggles is also hinging on the success of conservation farming in Chivi south district. It was observed that local leaders, such as village heads and the chiefs, tend to be self-centered when it comes to the implementation of programs aimed at improving the livelihoods of the rural poor. NGOs operating in Chivi south sometimes try to adopt a participatory method, but local leaders insist on a unilateral approach in order for their presence to be felt. This, however, is largely coalescing against the success of conservation farming in improving food security in Chivi south district.

CONCLUSION

In spite of the much publicized virtues, conservation farming paradoxically is doing very little to abet the perennial food insecurity quagmire confronting villagers in ward 21 in Chivi south district. This stems from a myriad of challenges and shortcomings associated with this farming technique. The villagers in question have a lot of misgivings for the program, which in their view is only aimed at reversing the gains they have made in terms of enhancing food security in their households. The bulk of the farmers dislike the project for lacking a human face, since it is not participatory, labor intensive, time consuming retrogressive, and imposed by the NGOs, thus it is of very little significance to their community and culture. All these factors are coalescing against the success of this project in ward 21, in particular, and in Chivi south district, in general. To salvage conservation farming from its vestiges, it is imperative for the NGOs in question to conscientize the villagers on the significance of the program, set up supporting structures, and avail adequate input, as well as involve the locals in the whole project cycle. The feasibility of adopting such an approach, however, remains precarious given the power relations and the bureaucratic nature of these NGOs. Local farmers, however, should not be treated as passive victims of their poverty, but as knowledgeable actors who have the capacity to act and react even under the most extreme conditions, thereby influencing the directions and outcomes of development interventions. The quest for sustainable development will therefore remain elusive unless and until the voices and priorities of the local people such as those in ward 21 are not heard and incorporated into development intervention programmes. With regards to sustainable agriculture, this phenomenon of conservation farming is best achieved through community driven development processes whereby local communities and farmer associations identify and implement the best options for conservation farming which are particular to their respective locations. In view of the goals of sustainable development, there is need for the stakeholders in conservation farming project to strike an interface for them to reconcile their conflicting perceptions pertaining to the significance of conservation farming. This consensus will thus be a pre – requisite for making this programme a success and subsequently the achievement of sustainable development goals in the aforementioned area.

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